

# RISK AND PROTECTIVE FACTORS

Many studies over the past two decades have tried to determine the beginnings and pathways of substance abuse. Several factors have been identified that differentiate those who use drugs from those who don't. The factors associated with greater potential for drug use are called "risk" factors, and those associated with reduced potential for drug use are called "protective" factors. Risk and protective factors fall in to five categories (also called domains): individual, peer, family, schools, community, and environmental.

### ▼ Each Factor Represents a Challenge

Research has revealed that there are many risk factors for drug abuse. Each risk factor represents a challenge to the psychological and social development of an individual and each has a different impact depending on the phase of development of the individual. For this reason, those factors that affect early development in the family are probably the most crucial, such as:

- chaotic home environments, particularly in which parents are substance abusers or suffer from mental illnesses;
- ineffective parenting, especially with children with difficult temperaments and conduct disorders; and lack of mutual attachments and nurturing.

### ▼ Social Interaction Risk Factors

Other risk factors relate to children interacting with other social agents outside of the family, specifically the school, peers, and the community. Some of these factors are:

- inappropriate shy and aggressive behavior in the classroom;
- failure in school performance;
- poor social coping skills;
- affiliations with peers who exhibit deviant behaviors;
- indications of approval of drug-using behaviors in the school, peer, and community environments.

### ▼ Protective Factors

Certain protective factors have also been identified. These factors are not always the opposite of risk factors. Their impact also varies along the developmental process. The most prominent protective factors include:

- strong bonds with the family;
- experience of parental monitoring with clear rules of conduct within the family unit and involvement of parents in the lives of their children;
- successful school performance;

- strong bonds with prosocial institutions such as the family, school, and religious organizations; and
- belief and adoption of conventional norms about drug use.

Risk and protective factors provide a useful and important framework for developing prevention programs and approaches. Prevention activities targeting clusters of risk and protective factors have proven to be effective deterrents to alcohol, tobacco and other drug use by youths. They also have proven to be effective deterrents to other problem behaviors, especially teenage pregnancy and juvenile delinquency.

## ▼ Resources

Additional information about risk and protective factors can be found on the following websites:

- National Institute on Drug Abuse  
<http://www.drugabuse.gov>
- Center for Substance Abuse Prevention  
<http://www.samhsa.gov>  
<http://www.preventiondss.org>
- Centers for the Application of Prevention Technologies  
<http://www.captus.org>



For more information,  
contact the  
Missouri Department of  
Mental Health,  
Division of  
Alcohol and Drug Abuse  
P.O. Box 687  
1706 East Elm  
Jefferson City, MO 65102  
573-751-4942  
or 1-800-364-9687  
[modmh.state.mo.us](http://modmh.state.mo.us)



Sources: "Preventing Drug Abuse Among Children and Adolescents," National Institute on Drug Abuse, March 1997 and "Principles of Substance Abuse Prevention," Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Center for Substance Abuse Prevention, 2001